Free From What, For Whom?
Romans 6 - 7: selected
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This sermon is about an issue that can be set out by way of three very simple illustrations. The first illustration is that famous, running, one-liner from "Laugh-In", which advises America, "If it feels good, do it." The second illustration is its opposite, and comes from a television show on Tuesday night, "All in the Family". A young couple is trying to explain how they feel justified in living together, without having been legally married. They talk in eloquent terms about dedication and integrity and commitment and love; to which Archie Bunker, hero of the show, responds: "Don't give me none of that love stuff. This here's a Christian home."

The third illustration is that St. Louis cab driver, a life long member of one party, about to switch, who said, "... there are times when a man has to push his principles aside and do the right thing." [p. 13 Situation Ethics, Fletcher]

The issue is in the relationship between those three different ethical positions, and there is probably no more important, nor disturbing issue in front of the American people today. For what it's worth, there was probably no more important nor disturbing issue before the Christians in Rome in 54 A.D. either.

Today, however, there is a deep and growing concern that somehow, as a culture, we are being led down the prim-rose path to moral anarchy, open license, vice and iniquity. There is real concern that the old, time-honored standards of right and wrong have been discarded and tramped on, and dragged through the mud and dirt. There is a concern about something called the "moral fiber" of our nation; and it is generally assumed that that fiber is not nearly as tough as it was, say, 25 years ago. We are concerned about what appears to be a total disregard for traditional standards of sexual behavior before and in marriage. We worry about motion pictures and books and communes and group marriages. It seems that in our generation the flood gates of

immorality have been opened and we're all about to be innundated. I say, "it seems" because I remain pretty skeptical about the moral fiber argument. Nevertheless, it is a major concern for us - and it is abundantly true, that regardless of what people are or are not doing, we are witnessing the challenging of an old, accepted form of morality, and the redefinition of what is right, good and acceptable.

The early Christians, of course, thought the very same thing. In the same manner as us they lived through a time when traditional forms of morality were challenged and redefined. For them, it was as a result of a new theological idea - the idea of grace. And the man most responsible for their dilemma was St Paul. Paul was saying some unsettling things about a Christians' relationship to the law - and a Christians' definition of rightness and wrongness. They were upset. Paul seemed to be dangerously undercutting the moral structure of society.

For several weeks we've been thinking about the idea of grace as it is presented by Paul in his letter to the Romans. Grace, you will recall, is the unmerited love of God, freely given in Jesus Christ. For Paul, the very essence of the Gospel was the fact that God, on his own, had done everything necessary for man's salvation: that no man could make himself worthy of that gift: that in Jesus Christ God had brought into human history a whole new situation in which forgiveness, peace and reconciliation were now realities.

We thought about the implications of that Gospel in terms of a story about an emotionally crippled little girl. The girl had withdrawn into herself and was suspicious and hostile toward everyone else. But one nurse, by consistant, patient, unmerited love, broke through and established a relationship of trust. The girl was set free from her bondage to self - she was saved by grace.

We thought about how that assaults something deep down inside us; namely our own pride - our presumption that we can actually build up a good record with God by doing good things. We thought about the serious difficulty we

have accepting the fact that in Jesus Christ we are loved, safe and free: and that our task is not so much to try to be Christians, as it is to live like the saved, reconciled people we already are.

Well, one of the by-products of the theology of grace, appears to be the license to do whatever you want. After all, if our salvation is assured: if God loves us in spite of what we are, why bother trying to be good?

When Paul says things like "we are set free from the law" - it seems as if he's saying there are no longer any restrictions on your behavior whatever. Go and do whatever you want. Or in the words of "Laugh-In": "If it feels good, do it."

The fact is that the early Christians were very bothered by this. They had spent a life-time trying to live according to all the rules and regulations contained in the Jewish law. Now Paul was telling them that the law was dead. Some of them, on the other hand, accepted Paul's theology of grace and pushed it to its logical conclusion.

If God's grace encompassed all of human sin, they reasoned, why not sin some more, in order that grace may have a greater opportunity to operate. Why not throw over all the rules? Why not be totally free?

These people even had a name: "antinomians" - against the law - against all law: and they were quite serious in their position regarding proper Christian behavior. They took absolutely literally, Paul's statements about freedom from the law, and tried to live in what amounted to a moral vacuum. We can assume that there were, in their ranks, those who were looking for an excuse to do what they wanted to do. But, by and large, it was a serious proposition.

Paul sensed it - and the danger it posed to the integrity of the Gospel. He sensed that he was vulnerable at this point, and that he could be misconstrued as an antinomian himself. So he joined the issue, head-on, in the sixth and seventh chapters of the letter to the Romans. It's very heavy going - and many New Testament Scholars conclude that Paul failed adequately

to explain himself - and that he was victimized by his own logic.

In any case he begins with a strong, personal disclaimer. "What are we to say, then? Shall we persist in sin, so that there may be all the more grace? No, no!" The King James version translates "God forbid!" which catches Paul's outrage at so preposterous a suggestion. Later in chapter six, he raises the issue again: "What, then? Are we to sin, because we are not under law but under grace?" For him, the answer is perfectly clear: "of course not!"

In his own life Paul apparently had no difficulty resolving the difference between grace and law. To the end he remained a faithful Jew, a Pharisee, in fact, obedient to the law. Yet, at the same time, gloriously aware of this freedom given to him in Jesus Christ. But the more he talked about it the deeper he got into what looks like the antinomian position. Ultimately, there seems to be no role whatever for the law in the thought of Paul. It is fulfilled in Christ: dead - in Christ. It has no authority - in reality for the Christian. The new life in Christ will be lived out of some other context. That is where his logic leads us - even if he, himself, did not live in this manner, and even if he tries to back away from the antinomian position with strong denials.

Yet it is precisely at this point that I feel the unfairness of squeezing Paul into a theological box. He was more than a theologian. He was a man - a man who felt and experienced as well as thought theologically: a man who had discovered his freedom in Christ - but also retained his old loyalty to the law.

I expect all of us are a little like that. It isn't always fair to insist that we be entirely rational, or always consistant. It is possible for us to know something intellectually, and yet emotionally to have experiences and feelings that deny our knowledge. It is possible to live under grace and the law - perhaps even necessary.

In any case, in pursuing his theology of grace Paul says very little about the ethical demands God places upon his children. He does not ignore this aspect of the faith - but his emphasis is definitely on the side of grace. The perceptive Christian will see this, and understand it, and add to it the corrective provided in the life of Jesus himself. For Jesus, God was a God of grace and justice: a God who freely gave - but also placed strenuous demands on his children. In Christian faith we are always dealing with God's gift and our responsibilities as recepients of his gift. We can discuss the nature of those responsibilities. We can disagree about what God demands of us. But to suggest that he demands nothing is either sheer nonsense or moral laziness - or perhaps both.

Now, let's bring it up to date. It is a bit presumptuous, of course, to attempt to say something relevant about Christian morality in a few minutes. It is even more presumptuous to tack it on to a sermon - as if all the pieces will now fall into place. They will not. We are left with some rather perplexing questions. But we can, I believe, apply our knowledge of what's happening in the pages of the New Testament to one situation and come out with - at least - a framework for asking ethical questions, and a method for arriving at a personally satisfying answer.

I think that process begins when we recognize that Paul is trying to deal with two extemes - two widely different approaches to morality, neither one of which is very helpful to the Christian. They are lawlessness, or antinomianism, on the one hand, and legalism on the other hand. I think the process continues as we recognize that the same two extremes present themselves today.

Lawlessness takes the form of anarchy - free love, free speech, life on the basis of my own desires and needs alone. In a sense, this extreme is exactly what "Laugh-In" presents, tongue-in-cheek; or that Playboy magazine peddles in a subtle and sophisticated manner.

Legalism comes to us in the form of an Archie Bunker, dismissing love and insisting that a Christian home means following the rules: or in the paranoid wailing for "Law and Order". To adherents of both positions from Renie Davis to Spiro Agnew, the concept of Grace is incomprehensible: to one it is only an opportunity for irresponsibility: to the other, it is the enemy.

Somewhere in the middle is the Christian position. Somewhere between the two extremes is a morally responsible freedom. I've been helped by the insights contributed by the psychological disciplines - which tell us that there is probably is no such thing as absolute freedom. Emil Brunner said it well: "Freedom in general is an illusion, something impossible. The only choice before man is whom he wants to obey; never whether he wishes to be obedient." [p. 54 The Letter to the Romans]

I've been helped by an insight from my own experience, that when a sticky moral question is asked, our first inclination is to retreat to the rule book, and thereby avoid a difficult personal decision.

Somewhere between absolute freedom - which really means slavery to self - and bondage to a rigid legalism, is the Christian ethic. In Jesus Christ we have been set free from the law - that is, from the frantic accumulation of legally defined good-works in order to win our salvation. We don't have to worry about that anymore. We are free - because our salvation has been given to us.

But in receiving this gift, in really receiving it, embracing it, rejoicing in it, a man takes on himself a moral responsibility far greater than anything contained in a law. Suddenly he is confronted with the task of living like the child of God he is. Suddenly he is responsible for his brother - and his own life, in a way impossible under legalism.

Suddenly he is free from legal restrictions, for life in communion with God and man. One theologian put it this way: "The life of the Christian is

a happy sharing of a great love; a life that is moral to the degree that it is loving and helping and healing and serving." To which I would add - a life made possible by that great assurance - fairly shouted by Paul at the conclusion of his discourse:

"Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory."

Amen.

Eternal God, our Father, it is not easy to live in the freedom you have given. We would prefer rules; and sometimes we would prefer to do what we want. Give us the courage to live responsible lives; loving to all those about us; fair and honest and just; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.